

## Message

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<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/39850-east-chicago-s-pleas-for-clean-drinking-water-go-unanswered-as-trump-moves-to-weaken-epa>

## East Chicago's Pleas for Clean Drinking Water Go Unanswered as Trump Moves to Weaken EPA

Wednesday, March 15, 2017 By [Mike Ludwig](#), Truthout

Environmental justice is on the chopping block at the Environmental Protection Agency, and that doesn't bode well for communities like East Chicago, Indiana, where the agency recently discovered that drinking water is contaminated with lead.

Nearly two weeks ago, a number of East Chicago churches and community groups [petitioned](#) the EPA to take emergency action and [protect the majority-Black community from lead poisoning](#), which can cause a long list of health problems, especially in children. As of Tuesday, the local leaders and their environmentalist allies had yet to hear back from the agency.

The EPA's inaction in East Chicago comes as Trump's administration considers massive budget cuts that could crush the agency's environmental justice program, which is supposed to ensure the fair treatment of low-income communities and people of color under environmental law.

The agency's environmental justice office is slated to lose at least 78 percent of its funding, according to [data obtained](#) by the National Association of Clean Air Agencies. Last week, the office's longtime administrator resigned in frustration.

While researching soil contamination at the site, the EPA recently discovered that lead was present in East Chicago's drinking water, due to aging pipes that have not been properly treated for corrosion. Similar problems contributed to the [water crisis in Flint, Michigan](#), which drew national attention to environmental justice last year and inspired bold campaign statements from then-presidential candidate Donald Trump.

"This is a perfect example of an environmental injustice," said Debbie Chizewer, an attorney who teaches at Northwestern University and works with community groups in East Chicago, a small city in northwestern Indiana. East Chicago residents are now being evacuated from public housing at a Superfund site that is contaminated with lead left behind by heavy manufacturing. Superfund sites are federal priorities for environmental cleanup.

During his confirmation hearings, Scott Pruitt, Trump's pick for EPA administrator, told a Senate committee that the crisis in Flint was a "failure at every level of government" and criticized the EPA for waiting to take action until months after the lead problems became public. If faced with a similar situation, Pruitt said, he would use EPA's emergency authority if a state government failed to act.

Authorities in Indiana declared a state of emergency in East Chicago last month. Then, on March 2, community groups requested that the EPA use its authority under the Safe Drinking Water Act to ensure worried residents have access to clean drinking water and tap filters. Officials in Michigan provided clean drinking water to [Flint residents after receiving court orders to do so](#).

A spokesperson for the EPA told Truthout that the agency is reviewing the petition and will continue to work with the city and state to protect residents.

Anjali Waikar, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council who served the East Chicago petition, said the EPA's sluggish response to East Chicago's emergency request and the White House's plans to slash budgets both send a "clear message" that the Trump administration will not prioritize low-income communities and communities of color, which [disproportionately suffer](#) from pollution.

"This boils down to: How much does the administration value the lives in low-income communities of color?" Waikar said.

**Top Environmental Justice Official Resigns**

Facing an unfriendly White House, Mustafa Ali resigned from his position as the head of the EPA's environmental justice program last week. In his letter of resignation, Ali told Pruitt that low-income areas and communities of color "are still struggling to receive equal protection under the law," and many live with "toxic" levels of air pollution, broken sewer systems, drinking water contaminated with lead and pollution from hazardous waste sites.

In an [interview on Democracy Now!](#), Ali said he "just couldn't be part" of the Trump administration's plans to cut programs and dismantle regulations that have protected these "vulnerable communities" and helped them move forward after suffering from the impacts of pollution.

Ali urged Pruitt to support the program despite "shrinking budgets" and to take the time to listen to the people who are impacted by pollution. Critics do not expect Pruitt to take that advice seriously. In fact, environmentalists have said that the Trump nominee was one of the worst picks imaginable, in part because he [worked closely with polluters](#) to block major EPA regulations as the attorney general of Oklahoma.

The White House is expected to propose cutting the EPA's budget by [roughly 25 percent](#) and initiating thousands of layoffs. Trump and Pruitt are both known climate change skeptics, and climate initiatives are central targets of the proposed cuts. However, dozens of other programs considered less controversial could also see their budgets slashed. Democrats in Congress have [vowed to oppose](#) the proposed cuts.

### **Ongoing Civil Rights Complaints**

The EPA was under fire for [failing low-income communities](#) of color long before Trump took office. On Monday, a coalition of environmental groups asked a federal court in California to issue a summary judgment against the EPA for allowing several complaints filed with its civil rights office to languish for a decade or more.

The groups originally sued the agency in 2015 for failing to meet regulatory deadlines and amassing a backlog of civil rights complaints, largely from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color that suffer from disproportionate amounts of pollution due to discriminatory decisions made by state regulators. Federal civil rights law prohibits funding to state agencies that discriminate based on race, so for communities impacted by environmental injustice, the EPA is a main avenue for holding state regulators accountable [for clear patterns of discrimination](#).

Last year, the US Commission on Civil Rights [found that the EPA](#) was struggling to merge public health protections with civil rights when enforcing federal environmental laws, and its civil rights office had never made a formal finding of discrimination, despite the backlog of complaints.

Chizewer is aware of the EPA's track record on environmental justice. She said the agency knew about lead and arsenic contamination in East Chicago as far back as 1992, but the agency did not place the contaminated area on the federal Superfund priority list for cleanup until 2009. The Superfund program is reportedly the only program Pruitt has sought to protect from cuts.

Chizewer said the EPA recently saw some signs of improvement as its civil rights office came under mounting pressure in the waning years of the Obama administration.

Last year, the agency released a strategic [five-year plan](#) for environmental justice initiatives, as well as guidance for incorporating environmental justice and the voices of impacted communities into regulatory decision making. In some areas, the agency was even getting better at consulting local communities when making Superfund cleanup plans. Now, even these modest improvements appear to be in grave danger.

"I would say environmental justice work is critical," Chizewer said. "Most environmental burdens happen in environmental justice communities, and without support for that work, the communities and the nation as a whole will suffer."

Sincerely,

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